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ABSTRACT

This report describes the methods used to monitor the loss of library materials at Purdue University's General Library during the last 20 years. Data are provided on the following: a complete facility inventory taken in 1959: spot checks of high loss areas made on the basis of patron requests: an availability study in which patrons revealed the types of problems users found in searching for materials: and a sample inventory taken with the aid of OCLC tapes. A bibliography lists seven references. (FM)

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MONITORING BOOK LOSSES IN A LARGE ACADEMIC LIBRARY: FOUR METHODS

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ABSTRACT

Maintaining reliable records of book losses in a large university library is a difficult and time-consuming activity. It is the responsibility of the librarian to find a method to monitor losses, and to see that patrons and the library staff are informed of and have confidence in the library's control systems. The larger the library, the more challenging this assignment becomes. This is a history of the various methods used by Purdue University's General Library over the past twenty years: from a complete inventory; to patrons' reports of missing books; to an availability study; and finally to the present method, a sample inventory with the aid of OCLC tapes.

MONITORING BOOK LOSSES IN A LARGE ACADEMIC LIBRARY: FOUR METHODS

"What is your annual loss rate?" is a frequent question to librarians from interested or irate users. Those asking it very likely have no conception of the time and effort needed to give an accurate answer, nor of the number of libraries that cannot even attempt to give an educated guess. As long ago as 1959, a *Library Journal* article on inventory practices stated the current opinion that the value of inventory is ". . . largely offset by the excessive cost and agony usually involved."[1]

Yet there is no argument that knowing the magnitude of book losses is essential for library managers. How is the information to be gathered? Are there short cuts to learning what we need to know? Over the past twenty years, Purdue University's General Library has tried various methods of collecting this information, beginning with a complete inventory, then using patrons' reports of missing books, surveying availability, and most recently conducting a sample inventory with the help of OCLC tapes.

Complete Inventory

In 1959 the General Library took its last complete inventory of the monographic collection. The work was begun during the interim between fall and spring semesters and completed the following summer. Four teams of library clerks, supervised by a senior clerk and a librarian, spent about 20 weeks on the project.

First making certain the shelves were in perfect order, the clerks compared the contents of each shelf with the shelf list cards. After comparing each shelf list drawer with the shelves, clerks were instructed to follow through completely on books missing from the shelves by checking all other records and possible locations: circulation files, storage, mending, reserve, new books, and to-be-shelved areas.

Gradually, about 3000 volumes were identified as missing from a collection of about 200,000. A room was set aside to continue work on the project, and to store approximately 500 volumes which had been found on the shelves with no corresponding shelf list cards.

A year of further searching reduced the number of missing volumes to about 1300. Explanations were found for all of the 500 unrecorded volumes. The books had been withdrawn, belonged to other libraries, or had been marked incorrectly in processing. Many books had been listed as missing because of incorrect call numbers, either on the books or on the catalog cards. This shelf list inventory offered a good opportunity to correct cataloging records, improve book marking and shelf reading, and to find out if book losses in the library were significant. Although exact statistics on this activity are fragmentary, it appeared that less than one percent of the collection was missing in inventory.

Patrons' Reports of Missing Books

During the next decade, spot checks of high loss areas were made, mostly on the basis of patron requests. Losses were also monitored with the help of patrons by means of missing item reports. A patron who could not find a wanted book was encouraged to report it to the circulation desk. Missing items were searched for daily, and patrons were notified of the results. Statistics from one tabulation show the following:

Month	Total Circulation	Reported Missing	Still Missing After Search
January	9880	143	74
February	16953	198	105
March	18573	200	90
April	17650	150	70
Total	63056	691 (1%)	339 (.5%)

These statistics leave much to be desired in terms of total book losses because there is no information about the number of books unreported by patrons.

LIBRARY USAGE SURVEY

Number

1. How many library books, journals, etc. did you consult or borrow <u>on this visit</u>? ☐

2. How many library books, journals, etc. did you wish to consult or borrow but were not able to obtain <u>on this visit</u>? ☐

3. Please list complete call numbers for materials you were not able to obtain. (Use reverse side if necessary.)

Comments welcome on reverse side.

Please drop in Survey Box as you exit.

Thank you for your help.

Barbara Pinzelik
General Services Librarian

FIGURE 1
AVAILABILITY STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

Availability Study

Interest in finding some other way of checking on book losses and in learning more about difficulties patrons were experiencing in the library, and the influence of studies done by Michael Buckland,[2] then an assistant director of Purdue University Libraries, prompted an availability study in the library.

A performance measure that is of great interest to users and librarians, the availability rate is the percentage of books in the collection that are immediately obtainable.[3] The Purdue study was done over a nine week period in the spring of 1974. A questionnaire (Figure 1) was distributed in the library to patrons during randomly selected hours each week. The librarian distributing the questionnaire explained the survey and asked each patron to take a few minutes to complete the form and return it when leaving the library. Survey return boxes were placed at the exits. Within an hour after surveys had been returned, they were collected by librarians, who made an immediate search for items patrons could not find.

Because of the immediacy of the evidence of user experience, conducting this survey revealed the types of problems users found in searching for materials. Patrons were cooperative and interested in the findings. Of 417 surveys distributed, 290, or 69% were returned. Patrons had searched for 1628 items and found 1305, or 80%. Because the survey took place during the busiest time of the year, near the end of the spring semester, the high availability rate was unexpected. The survey showed that patrons could have been even more successful if they had asked for assistance.

Reasons for failure to find the remaining 323 items are categorized in Table 1. Under "Library Housekeeping" are included all special locations, which could have been identified immediately had the patron taken the extra step of asking at the circulation desk. The category "Library Failure" includes missing materials, and also those checked out, which could have been available if sufficient copies had been

TABLE 1
AVAILABILITY STUDY
ITEMS NOT FOUND

LIBRARY HOUSEKEEPING		
AT BINDERY	5	
PREVENTION OF LOSS COLLECTION	3	
STORAGE	12	
ON RESERVE	21	
REFERENCE	10	
TOTAL		51
USER FAILURE		
LOOKED IN WRONG LIBRARY	23	
USED WRONG CALL NUMBER	14	
PROVIDED INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION	54	
BOOK ON SHELF	54	
TOTAL		145
LIBRARY FAILURE		
CHECKED OUT	36	
NOT HELD	29	
KNOWN TO BE MISSING	6	
IN USE	1	
PAGES TORN OUT	4	
NO RECORD, NOT FOUND	51	
TOTAL		127
TOTAL NOT FOUND		323
FOUND		1305
TOTAL IN SURVEY		1628

Record history:

Book on shelf_✓_ Missing_____
In circulation____ Other_____

093.094531, / G328p

Gerulaitis, Leonardas Vytautas.

Printing and publishing in fifteenth-century Venice /

American Library Association ; 1976

Record history:

Book on shelf_✓_ Missing_____
In circulation____ Other_____

100 / B911

na

Bhurgerliche Wissenschaftsauffassungen in der Krise /

Verlag Marxistische Blhatter, 1976

Record histo

Book on shel
In circulati

100 / P6941

Platt, Rober

The I-opener

Prentice Hal

FIGURE 2

WORKSLIPS FOR OCLC INVENTORY

purchased. "User Failure" includes a large category for which the user supplied insufficient information for further search, such as "three poetry books."

TABLE 1

To compute a loss rate from this sample, from the base figure of 1628 were subtracted those for which there was insufficient information (54) and those not owned by the library (29), leaving 1545 titles to be found. There were 51 titles not found in the initial search, and 6 titles already known to be missing. Of this group of 57, 22 were later found, leaving 35 missing out of 1545, or a loss of 2.3%.

Continuing concern about book losses and alarming articles about library thefts[4] prompted an attempt to duplicate this study in the spring of 1979. The survey instrument and the methodology used were similar to that used in 1974. However, the patron response was completely different. There was great resistance to accepting survey forms. By the third survey period, the rate of return became so small that the project was discontinued. This change in attitude could be attributable to the present-day concern for privacy, with a resultant resistance to survey methods of information gathering.[5]

However, it seemed imperative that some information about book losses in the collection, which now held about 600,000 volumes, be gathered. A complete inventory was out of the question. Various sampling methods[6,7] had been documented, and it was decided to take a sample inventory with the help of the OCLC tapes of our holdings.

Sample Inventory

A random stratified sample of 10% of the acquisitions received since 1976 was programmed, and a work slip was printed for each title selected. (see Figure 2.) Workslips, in call number order, listed call number, author, title, publisher, and date, with space to list where the book was found.

TABLE 2

O C L C INVENTORY

CALL NUMBER	000	100	200	300	400	500	600	700	800	900	TOTAL	PERCENT
ON SHELF	83	138	153	875	104	37	113	265	952	407	3127	87%
CIRCULATING	3	2	3	27	3		4	8	11	4	65	2
PREVENTION OF LOSS	1										1	-
ATTIC	1						3	9		1	14	-
STACKS	3			11	12	2			17	2	49	1
REFERENCE	4	1	1	21	4	1	7	14	32	18	103	3
MENDING	1	1			1						3	-
RESERVE	2			12	2		4	2	1	2	25	1
SPEC. COLLECTION									3			3
MICROFORM									3	1	4	-
WITHDRAWN						3	1				4	-
WAREHOUSE						2	1				3	-
WRONG CALL NUMBER	4	3		1	1	2		1	8	1	21	1
WRONG LIBRARY				3	1	19	13				36	1
TOTAL FOUND	102	145	157	950	128	66	148	299	1027	436	3458	96%
NOT FOUND	1	1	2	54	1	2	19	23	35	19	157	4%
TOTAL SEARCHED	103	146	159	1004	129	68	167	322	1062	455	3615	100%

TABLE 3

FINAL RESULTS OF SAMPLE INVENTORY

CALL NUMBER	NUMBER SEARCHED	FOUND ON SHELF	FOUND ELSEWHERE	FOUND, 1ST FOLLOW-UP	FOUND, 2ND FOLLOW-UP	FOUND, FINAL FOLLOW-UP	STILL MISSING	PERCENT MISSING
000	103	83	19	1	0	0	0	0
100	146	138	7	0	0	0	1	.6
200	159	153	4	0	2	0	0	0
300	1004	875	75	8	10	11	25	2
400	129	104	24	0	0	1	0	0
500	68	37	29	1	0	0	1	1
600	167	113	35	7	2	3	7	4
700	322	265	34	5	3	5	10	3
800	1062	952	75	1	9	8	17	2
900	455	407	29	4	3	2	10	2
TOTAL	3615	3127	331	27	29	30	71	2

Taking the work slips to the shelves, circulation staff searched for each title. The initial searching took three weeks of full time activity by three experienced circulation clerks. The work was done during the interim between spring semester and summer session, when circulation activity was at its lowest, consequently a higher proportion of books was found on the shelves than would be normal during the period when classes are in session. Table 2 shows the results of the initial search. For some reason, the computer print-out simulated real life in that it occasionally printed a non-existent call number, or attributed a book to the wrong library. This was apparently caused by revisions which were being made after the book was cataloged.

TABLE 2

Follow-up continued intensively for several weeks, then occasional searches for those still missing continued for a year. Table 3 shows the final results.

TABLE 3

In using this sampling method, one must be aware that the sample is of the newest acquisitions, the books of most interest to readers. Therefore, drawing conclusions about the entire collection would be inaccurate. Another drawback of this sampling method as opposed to a complete inventory is that it does not bring out cataloging and marking errors, so that the opportunity for making corrections to records on a large scale is absent.

However, there are advantages. For a small investment in time, it can quickly be determined if any areas of the collection need further inventory. In addition to establishing that a high percentage of materials could be found on the shelf, the method helps to build staff confidence in circulation procedures and control systems.

Conclusion

Maintaining some regular method of inventory is essential to monitor book losses and provide responsible management of book collections.

Four greatly differing methods have been described. Results in each case have shown similarly small losses, and have indicated the effectiveness of present control systems.

However, with today's increasing book thefts and decreasing budgets, it is essential to have an ongoing means of monitoring the extent of book losses. Because the sample inventory of new materials, programmed from OCLC tapes, provides a good test of control systems and is accomplished within a few weeks, it is planned to continue this method.

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